

Executive Summary

This report is the product of the Cook County Records Management Project, which was conducted by the UIC Master of Public Administration Capstone Team. The project was a study of the records management practices of the government of Cook County, Illinois.

Statement of the Problem

Government entities in the state of Illinois are bound by the Local Records Act (50 ILCS 205) to: 1) maintain a current inventory of their records by submitting an *Application for Authority to Dispose of Local Records* to the appropriate Local Records Commission (LRC), and 3) dispose of records after authorization is granted through a *Records Disposal Certificate*, which must be submitted 60 days prior to the desired destruction date. Compliance with this procedure is poor among departments in Cook County. Continuing non-compliance with the Local Records Act is defined as a class four felony and exposes Cook County to legal liabilities.

Project Goals

The goals of the Cook County Records Management Project were: to research State of Illinois policies and procedures regarding records management, to ascertain the extent of compliance to these policies and procedures among bureaus and departments in Cook County, to research best practices in other county governments regarding records management, and to recommend solutions to records management problems in Cook County governments.

Key Findings

The Local Records Act lacks clarity conducive for compliance. Aspects of the act that relate to different record types are not clearly differentiated and retention schedules for different types of records are difficult to find. Communication of policies and procedures to county departments is relatively non-existent as most departments are not aware of how to properly manage their records.

There is little to no compliance among the two bureaus and seven departments studied in this project. None of the nine government entities kept inventories of their records. Some bureaus and departments routinely dispose of records without following the procedures of the Local Records Act. Only three of nine of the nine governments had a person on staff whose formal duties included maintaining inventories and following disposal procedures.

The establishment of a records management department or program is one of the best practices regarding records management that has been implemented in several county governments. These departments are typically staffed with five or six full-time employees (not including the agency head). Their duties include supporting county governments by: disseminating information regarding records management policies and procedures to county governments, helping governments maintain inventories of their records, helping governments to follow procedures for the disposal of records, and training Records Liaison Officers in county departments on records management practices.

Another best practice is the incorporation of a digitization system into the records management practices of the county. Digitization is the process of scanning and saving digital copies of documents on a central server. Such a system allows county governments to better organize their offices by automating the inventory process, cutting down on space, disposing of records according to legally mandated retention schedules and storing originals without being concerned with losing access to the files. Another advantage of digitization is that the digital copies can be accessible to multiple workers, eliminating the need for different county staffers to create multiple copies of the same document.

Project Results

In summary, the team is recommending the creation of an Office of Records Management (ORM), whose role would be to support the departments of Cook County in managing public records. The ORM would increase efficiency and cut down on cost by promoting standardized records management procedures, better organization, and by training department Records Liaison Officers, the ORM would be responsible for disseminating information regarding state records policies, and helping departments to maintain records inventories, monitor retention schedules, and promptly dispose of records once Records Disposal Certificates are approved.

The ultimate goal of ORM is to develop a countywide system for digitizing records, which is permitted under an amendment to the Illinois Local Records Act, effective January 1, 2001.